

# Odette Strugo Garay

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## Wartime radio operator with the SOE who fell in love as she escaped France over the Pyrenees

Already widowed when her Finnish husband Pilot Officer Denis Wilen was killed in a flying accident in 1942, Odette Wilen parachuted into central France on April 12, 1944. As a member of the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry she was seconded to the Special Operations Executive (SOE), trained as a radio operator and dropped to join the "Stationer" network working with the French Resistance between Périgueux and Montluçon.

There was clearly some urgency involved as she was not a fully trained parachutist. She had completed four practice jumps, including the most daunting one from a static balloon, but not the customary fifth to qualify for the coveted parachute "wings". Nevertheless she landed safely and shortly afterwards it was decided she should join the SOE team led by her fiancé Marcel Leccia, who had landed a few days before her to set up a new network codenamed "Labourer" to be based around Chartres.

Leccia and two members of his team were betrayed and he was executed in Buchenwald on September 10, 1944. On



hearing of his arrest, his sister Mimi went at once to the safe house where Wilen was staying and led her to safety minutes before the Gestapo arrived. Subsequently she worked with the "Stationer" circuit until sent to Paris to pick up an escape line and return to London

for deployment elsewhere.

This was not easily done as, in the interests of security, SOE circuits and the locally run escape lines kept themselves strictly separate. Even so, Wilen made a successful contact and by her own account cycled down the Champs d'Elysée with Mimi Leccia to begin her journey home.

A new romantic attachment occurred en route over the Pyrenees to neutral Spain and Gibraltar. She met Santiago Strugo Garay, head of the escape line Pyrenees section, who despite knowing her for only three days sought her out when the war in Europe ended and they were married in London. According to the *Official History of the SOE*, of the 53 women agents sent to France during the war 11 were executed by the Germans and a further three died while on missions.

The couple emigrated to Argentina as Strugo Garay had fought on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War and did not fancy his chances in business in Franco's Spain. They set up house in Buenos Aires and became

prominent in Anglo-Argentine society. They had two children: a son Miguel, who went to Oxford before becoming a banker in Buenos Aires and a daughter Regina Maria, a rock music manager. Her husband died in 1997 and she remained in Buenos Aires.

She was born Odette Victoria Sar in 1919. After a casual conversation with the British air attaché, Wing Commander Simon Dowling, she submitted a plea to receive the parachute wings she had narrowly missed earning in 1944. On grounds that any SOE agent who had made an operational jump into enemy-held territory was entitled to the wings, the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Glenn Torpy, authorised the award which she received from the British ambassador, Dr John Hughes, on August 9, 2007. Wing Commander Dowling also presented her with a silver parachute wings brooch that she wore day-to-day.

**Odette Strugo Garay, wartime agent of the SOE, was born on April 25, 1919. She died on September 22, 2015, aged 96**